

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 June 2013

Garment workers' strikes continue in Ashulia and Gazipur

Around 3,000 garment workers of Dynasty BD Limited in Ashulia and Gazipur industrial belts, on the outskirts of Dhaka, walked out on June 3 to demand payment of overdue salaries and other financial benefits, and immediate withdrawal of the cases filed against workers as a result of the recent industrial action. At least 50 workers were injured when police used rubber bullets and baton-charged demonstrating workers. The Dynasty Group suspended production for several days at its factories in fear of further labour unrest.

Last week, 20,000 garment workers rallied in Ashulia and blocked the main highway to Dhaka to demand better pay. Ongoing protests since the Rana Plaza catastrophe have reduced garment production in Ashulia to 80 percent capacity. The Ashulia plants account for 30 percent of Bangladesh's total garment exports.

Bangladeshi garment workers walk out over extended hours

On June 5, thousands of garment workers from seven factories in Dhaka's Tejgaon industrial zone walked off the job and protested on the Tejgaon-Mohakhali and Gulshan road links. Traffic was disrupted for several hours until police intervened, forcing demonstrators to disperse. The strike was a continuation of industrial action that began two days earlier by Sepal Garments employees against a management proposal to lengthen the work day from 10 to 12 hours without overtime. Workers complained that the working day had already been extended by one hour and that no lunch was provided.

Dhaka police fire on demonstrating Rana Plaza workers

Dhaka police used fire arms and water canon on June 5 in an attempt to stop a demonstration by several hundred garment workers and the relatives of victims killed in the collapsed Rana Plaza building. According to local media, around 50 people were injured when police attacked. Police claim that the gun shots were directed into the air.

Protesters who blocked streets near the collapsed Rana Plaza building demanded rehabilitation and compensation for the Rana Plaza victims and still missing workers and a death sentence for the owner of the building. Despite the brutal offensive by police, protesters vowed to continue their actions until a government high official visits the Rana Plaza site and meets workers' demands.

Transport workers in Bangladesh's northern districts strike

Government transport workers in the Rangpur districts struck for 48 hours on June 5 over 14 claims. Their demands included a separate wage structure, issuing of appointment letters as per the government gazette, deferment of new bus registrations and an end to extortions by police on roads and highways.

Transport between Rangpur's eight northern districts was brought to a stand-still during the strike. The strike erupted after the government failed to respond to a June 4 deadline on demands submitted by the Bangladesh Transport Workers Federation to the labour ministry.

India: Rail Wheel Factory workers in Bangalore protest

Around 179 contract workers from Indian Railways' Rail Wheel Factory in Yelahanka protested in Bangalore on June 3 to demand regularisation of services within a month and provision of benefits like Employees State Insurance and Provident Fund. Workers are concerned that management recently hired 200 new recruits but has failed to regularise any of its contract workers since 1999. The Wheel and Axle Plant Contract Workers' Union submitted a memorandum to the management.

Belgaum medical institute workers stage protest in Karnataka

Group D Workers of Belgaum Institute of Medical Sciences (BIMS) in India's south-west coastal state of Karnataka protested on the premises on June 1. They were demanding the institute renew their contracts, which came to an end on May 31. The workers fear that the government is planning to outsource their jobs.

Kerala power workers protest

Kerala State Electricity Board (KSEB) workers protested on May 31 in Cochin against cuts in workers' benefits and the board's failure to grant other demands. The protest was organised by the Kerala Electricity Workers Federation, affiliated with the Stalinist All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

The central and Kerala state governments began work this year on a debt

refinancing package for KSEB which allows private participation in electricity distribution and proposes splitting the KSEB into separate generation, transmission and distribution companies.

Injuries mount as Cambodian police attack striking Nike employees

Four thousand Sabrina (Cambodia) workers in Kampong Speu province west of Phnom Penh remain on strike in the face of ongoing attacks by police and military personnel. The workers, who walked out on May 21 over low wages, produce garments for the giant Nike corporation. The factory is one of five in Cambodia manufacturing for Nike.

Eight union leaders were arrested and over 20 strikers hospitalised on June 3 when 1,000 riot police, using batons and shields, attempted to break up a clash between strikers and 1,000 non-striking workers in the factory compound. It followed a police assault on May 27, when 23 workers, mostly women, were hospitalised and a pregnant worker lost her baby.

On Wednesday, around 1,000 striking Sabrina workers, watched by several hundred riot police, protested outside the Kampong Speu Provincial Court to demand the release of their jailed union leaders.

The strikers are demanding an increase in their meagre \$US75 monthly basic salary and \$14 per month to help pay for transport, rent and healthcare costs.

Cambodia's garment industry employs over 400,000 workers and accounts for \$4 billion, or roughly 80 percent, of Cambodia's total export revenue.

South Korean auto workers vote to strike

Nearly 95 percent of 2,650 unionised workers at the Busan plant of Renault Samsung Motors, the Korean unit of French automaker Renault, have voted for industrial action while negotiations for a new wage agreement are in progress. Workers planned to strike for one hour on the day and midnight shifts, commencing June 3.

Union demands include a 130,498 won (\$US117) monthly base pay raise, allocating 30 percent of the company's net profit for workers' bonuses, extending the retirement age to 61 and a 10 million won technical education allowance for employees' children. Management has proposed to freeze wages and reduce benefits.

Western Australia: Perth airport security screeners walk out again

For the second time in eight days, 80 MSS airport security screening workers at Qantas and Jetstar terminals at the Perth Domestic Airport in Western Australia walked off the job for 48 hours on June 4 in an ongoing dispute over a new work agreement. The snap strike was in response to MSS management locking out 14 workers for attending a stop work meeting. Last week, workers struck for 24 hours after management locked out five fellow workers for the same reason.

The United Voice union wants a 20 percent pay rise over three years, an increase in shift allowances and weekend penalties to bring them on par with MSS screeners in other states. MSS workers in Perth earn 8.7 percent less annually than their counterparts in Adelaide and Melbourne where

living costs are significantly lower. Workers rejected management's offer of just 3.2 percent annual increases over four years.

New South Wales nurses and midwives continue protesting

Over 1,000 members of the NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) and supporters rallied outside the rural offices of 40 state members of parliament on May 31 to demand guaranteed minimum nursing hours in general wards on par with the larger hospitals in Sydney. This equates to a minimum of six hours per patient per day or one nurse for every four patients. The protests are part of an ongoing state-wide campaign.

Other demands include minimum nursing and midwifery levels to hospital emergency departments and high dependency units and that midwives have a maximum of four hours per shift contact time with patients, leaving four hours to attend to associated duties.

The current Public Health System Nurses & Midwives (State) Award expires on June 30. The NSWNMA has restricted its pay demand to a 2.5 percent annual increase in exchange for guaranteed staff-to-patient ratios. A union official said that the state Liberal government had rejected all their demands and offered only 2.25 percent annual increases.

Australian shipbuilding workers end industrial action

Over 600 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union at the heavy engineering and shipbuilding firm Forgacs, with plants in Newcastle, Sydney and Brisbane, accepted the union's proposal to end a month of industrial action and vote on the latest proposal from their employer in their dispute for a new work agreement. The decision was taken during a 24-hour stoppage on June 5.

The shipbuilding workers began a series of strikes and protests on May 2 after negotiations to replace their enterprise agreement, which expired in March, reached deadlock.

In the tentative deal negotiated by the union, workers would receive annual wage increases of 3.5 percent over two years and 3.75 percent for the third year, and the trial of a nine-day working fortnight. The settlement of what the union claimed was the main sticking point in negotiations—the addition of a new dispute settlement clause and the “consultation process”—has not been made public.

Workers will decide on June 13 in an official ballot whether to accept the deal. Only 55 percent of 300 employees accepted the deal in an unofficial ballot at Forgacs' Hexham site in Newcastle on Wednesday.

Forgacs is building the \$8 billion Hobart Class Air Warfare Destroyers for the Australian military. The company operates seven facilities throughout New South Wales and Queensland, including three strategic portside facilities.

Australian Capital Territory nurses reject pay offer

On May 28, Canberra nurses voted to reject the Australian Capital Territory's Labor-Greens government proposal to increase nursing wages by just 2 percent a year for the next four years. Nurses said the offer was below the inflation rate and unacceptable.

Negotiations for a new enterprise agreement with the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) have been ongoing since last year. The union wants a 5 percent annual pay increase for the next four years and improvements to night shift penalties, rosters and the career structure for nurses. An ANF official told media that no industrial action was proposed before the current agreement expires on June 30.

New Zealand LNG tanker drivers on strike

Eight of ten drivers for Rockgas, the consumer natural gas arm of one of New Zealand's largest energy retailers and electricity generators Contact Energy, walked off the job on a planned eight-week strike over a proposed pay cut on June 3. Their action follows a six-day strike in April after three months of negotiations between Rockgas and the FIRST Union failed to reach a new employment agreement.

The company has proposed a two-year agreement with a cut of \$1 per hour to the base rate. Drivers are seeking a pay rise to reflect the higher pay among Rockgas's competitors, better conditions and improved safety.

New Zealand McDonald's workers continue protests

Workers at McDonald's fast food outlets in Manurewa, Manukau and Clendon walked off the job for one hour and picketed restaurant entrances on June 1 and 2. The ongoing pay dispute involves 1,500 McDonald's employees across New Zealand.

Unite union members have rejected a 25 cent per hour pay rise offer by McDonald's and demanded pay parity with workers at the restaurant chain KFC and payment for withheld break time. According to Unite, McDonalds owes its workers about \$2.5 million in stolen wages across their 160 stores.

Papua New Guinea union supports employer's sacking of striking members

In fear of losing their jobs, 1,000 striking palm oil workers at the Gusap Estate of Ramu Agri Industries Ltd. (RAIL), in Madang ended a one week strike on June 3 after their union allowed the sacking of 265 fellow striking workers. The Ramu Agri Industries National Employees Union (RAINEU) supported management's claim that the wildcat strike over a pay cut, which had closed down the processing mill and stopped all production at the company's three plantations, was illegal.

The strike was sparked when management reduced pay alleging that workers had not met production targets agreed to in the current union-negotiated collective bargaining agreement (CBA). A union official justified deserting its members telling the media that the terminations were done under the CBA, which stated that workers who were absent for four consecutive days were automatically terminated. Workers complained that the CBA had never been explained.

Police were called to the plantation to assist RAIL management to remove the terminated workers and their families from company residences after workers changed the door locks and refused to leave.





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